

## INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT



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## L.A. COUNTY SUPERVISOR MARK RIDLEY-THOMAS OP-ED: THE TIME FOR GRADE POLICY REVIEW IS NOW

The following op-ed piece, written exclusively for VerdeX by Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, argues for a legislative review of the Grade Crossing Policy used by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro). Supervisor Ridley-Thomas argues that a better mix of pedestrian safety, train flow, and automobile traffic must be established for the success of such transit projects as the Expo Line, now currently being built in Los Angeles. Getting the project right is a must—record expansion of the public transit system in Los Angeles County and unprecedented funding through Measure R present opportunities that could make or break such efforts in the region in the future.

Train metaphors can evoke both hope and fear. A venture may be praised as “an engine of progress,” or scorned as “a train wreck waiting to happen.”

The Expo Line, already under construction and planned to someday connect downtown to Santa Monica, is on track to fit either description.

Done right, the rail line could elevate the quality of life in some of Los Angeles’ poorest neighborhoods; done poorly, it could become a literal roadblock to road traffic and a figurative one to desirable real estate development in several areas.

For now, the Expo Line is on a collision course. That’s because the light rail line’s planning methods call for trains to run at street-level through busy intersections, including the neighborhoods surrounding Dorsey High School and the Westside Pavilion shopping mall.

Metro’s Grade Crossing Policy dictates whether a train crosses an intersection at street level, is elevated above the crossing, or put underground. Adopted in 2003, the policy favors car traffic volume in decision making: train tracks are slated to be built above or below streets at the intersections that move the most cars, since these are most likely to see traffic snarled by the trains.

Why does a train cross the road? The question raises a curious public policy riddle: how do you set off a controversy that infuriates residents in both South-Central and the Westside?

The Grade Crossing Policy uses seven criteria to evaluate traffic and safety. The first six criteria assess traffic volumes and the degree to which a train moving through an intersection would cause a back-up of cars. The seventh criterion is a safety review.

A more balanced and safety-oriented methodology for arriving at grade separation decisions is clearly possible, and desirable.

The intersections at Overland Ave. and Westwood Blvd. fell short of the standard for an elevated or underground rail crossing. But there’s plenty of car traffic from the nearby Westside Pavilion and an elementary school near the tracks.

That has the well-connected homeowners in the area furious they did not get the above-street crossing designation granted to other Westside intersections such as two crossings along Olympic Blvd.—one at Bundy Drive another at Cloverfield Blvd.

The Grade Crossing Policy weighs automobile traffic more heavily than safety. In pedestrian-heavy low-income areas, the consequences can be deadly as pedestrians are hit by trains. This is already clear along Metro’s Blue Line, which cuts through a swath of poor South Los Angeles neighborhoods east of the Harbor Freeway.

Collisions between trains and cars and pedestrians on the Blue Line occur with surprising frequency. Unsurprisingly, they are often fatal.

Coincidentally, the intersections with the most car traffic—and those set to get grade-separated crossings—tend to also be in more well-off neighborhoods. Those areas tend to have vibrant commercial centers, which in turn generate car traffic.

While there was no intentional policy of “environmental racism” guiding the decisions to elevate rail tracks in those areas, the policy can still lock in disparity.

In the low-income neighborhoods in which apartment dwellers will look straight out their front windows to see speeding trains, the rail line could become a development death sentence.

If built with grade separations and attractive enhancements, a rail line could easily promote

new development in a distressed area. But without proper community safeguards, a train can also be a nuisance that scares off anyone planning to build a commercial or residential development.

It’s a vicious cycle: once an at-grade train is put into an at-risk neighborhood, the area is unlikely to ever develop the density and vehicle traffic required to meet the grade-separated crossing standard.

Some argue an at-grade crossing can be built as a first-step, to be followed by an elevated or underground crossing in the future, when an area has developed. But the at-grade crossing is itself a barrier to development and neighborhood improvement.

These crossings not only expose residents and visitors to safety concerns; they also effectively eliminate the possibility of intense future development in the future by restricting the traffic-handling capacity of local streets.

In other words, the current Grade Crossing Policy discriminates against underdeveloped neighborhoods, denying them opportunities to enjoy the same economic prospects as areas which have already been substantially developed.

In virtually every instance in which it has been applied, the current Grade Crossing Policy has drawn fierce opposition from the communities it is intended to serve. This continuous chorus of complaints from our constituents cannot be ignored by the Metro Board. When an engineering calculation produces results that are contrary to human intuition, and contradict the concerns of our constituents regarding the safety of their neighborhoods, then these technical calculations must be carefully reviewed, and revised where appropriate. ♦♦♦